

Standing Out from the Crowd

By Patricia Brehm, Associate Editor

Four Ways to Differentiate Your Business

Within the metal construction industry there are a myriad of manufacturers, developers and general contractors. As the economic pressure builds for contractors to win bidding wars for new and retrofit projects, standing out in a sea of competitors could give your company the competitive and financial edge. Following are four ways that successful companies have differentiated themselves, helping them weather the economic storm.

1. Embrace New Technology

Construction technology continues to grow from the job site to the office. Despite the past years of economic downturn, the fragile economy is actually pushing some companies to embrace new technology. As Lee Chapman, project manager with Skanska, Queens, N.Y., notes, "After the economic downturn Skanska started exploring ways to reduce our temporary power and utility costs on projects."

To cut down on costs, Chapman looked for industry innovation. "I attended the 2009 Green-build International Expo floor in Phoenix talking to LED lighting vendors in the convention hall, asking if they had any temporary LED lighting systems for a pilot program," he explains. "Out of all the vendors I spoke with I only found one manufacturer, [Westbury, N.Y.-based] Clear Vu Lighting, who is an innovative vendor of harsh environment LED products. Since their existing product had a high upfront unit cost, they worked with Skanska on adapting it to fit an entirely new segment and market."

Bringing in LED to the job site provided more than a power solution. The end result is a new construction technology that has given Skanska considerable attention. Skanska has done a great

job of marketing by example in implementing LED lighting on more than one job site so that clients and industry professionals have taken notice. Chapman notes the success of working with LED has allowed Skanska to explore future innovations, which he says, "could change the way we work."

New technology is also changing the way information is carried to and from the job site. In 2010, Robert G. Brinkmann of Brinkmann Constructors, Chesterfield, Mo., began to explore the possibilities of Apple's iPad. Working with Impact Technologies Inc., St. Louis, the two firms developed the Construction Superintendent iPad app under the joint venture, Construction Centrics. The Construction Superintendent app allows project managers and site superintendents to manage job site related workflow, including schedules, cost, safety and profitability.

As Mark Lutz, project superintendent with Brinkmann Constructors explains, "The iPad makes us more efficient and able to spend more time in the field as opposed to spending time at a desk. A superintendents' time is best spent in the field." Additionally, the iPad app has given Brinkmann Constructors favorable media attention. Their work with communications firm Casey Communications, St. Louis, has led to mentions in Engineering News Record, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Colorado Real Estate Journal and others.

2. Provide Superior Customer Service

Any contractor can provide superior customer service, regardless of whether the job is a public bid or a private project. However, it's especially difficult to provide exceptional customer service when the building's occupants are eating, working

and playing on the job site. This was the reality for Louisiana Roofing Contractors LLC, Bossier City, La., when working on the eight-building Houghton Middle School in Houghton, La. Construction and work on the roof had to continue without disrupting the school year.

"We had people within a few minutes of the job site to address any issues in a very timely manner," notes Paul Tipton, CEO of Louisiana Roofing Contractors. "We had to keep the owner a priority and not interfere with the school schedule."

Despite a tight schedule and the massive undertaking of re-roofing eight buildings, the job was completed on time with complimentary results. Rather than implementing a formal marketing strategy, Louisiana Roofing Contractors relies on its strength in coordinating projects and client satisfaction. For contractors seeking to offer a high level of customer service, "try to put a plan together and coordinate hand-in-hand with other team members to head off any problems," advises Tipton.

3. Go Green

Adopting green and sustainable technologies as soon as possible can make a company stand out and give the marketing department a whole new way to present the company. For example, Sarasota, Fla.-based Willis A. Smith Construction Inc. has placed a priority on sustainable building construction. "Sustainable construction has become a major endeavor for us over the last eight years," says David E. Sessions, president of Willis A. Smith.

Aside from several LEED certified projects, the company went so far as to make its company headquarters green. "We spent our own money and

put ourselves in the client's position, while simultaneously being the builder," says Sessions. The end result was a LEED Gold certified building that Sessions notes, "gave us insight that our competitors simply don't have."

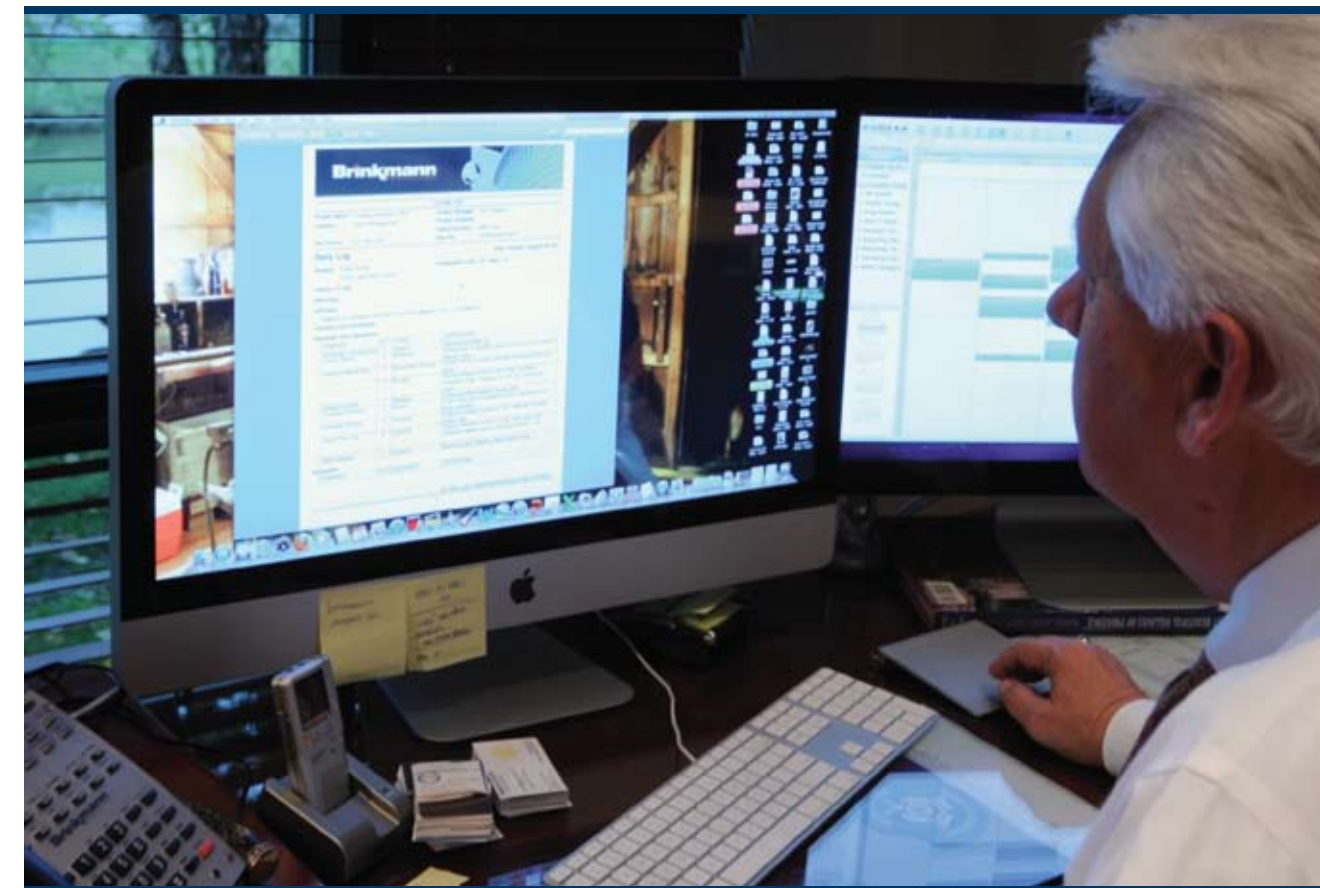
Additionally, Willis A. Smith Construction does more than lead by example; the company makes a point of educating clients of the potential found in going green. By giving corporate tours and holding an Open House and Sustainable Showcase event, Willis A. Smith invites clients and business prospects to come and experience sustainable building first hand, featuring promotional materials, sustainable products and a chance to meet the subcontractors who work on the sustainable projects. Overall, Willis A. Smith markets itself as a green general contractor by walking the walk and talking the talk when dealing with sustainable construction.

4. Adapt or Innovate

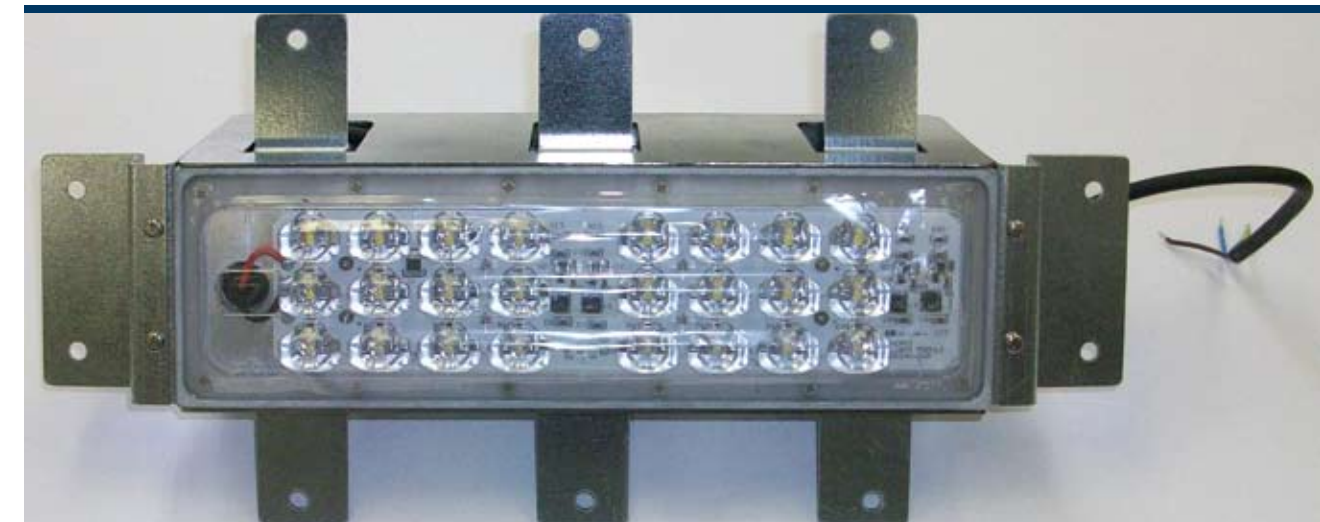
The economic climate has taken its toll on the metal construction industry. However, the truly successful companies continue to find new opportunities within the existing market or expand their business. For Brinkmann and Skanska, looking for new solutions to current job site problems sparked a new way of working, while Louisiana Roofing Contractors simply took the notion of customer service to another level. Other contractors, like Willis A. Smith, are branching out and taking on a new identity as a green contractor and a green company. Overall, the message is clear that to make a mark in the turbulent market, contractors and companies need to adapt or innovate in order to stand out from the construction crowd. ■



St. Stephens is a LEED Silver project completed in 2010 by Willis A. Smith Construction. (Photo courtesy of Willis A. Smith Construction)



Bob Brinkmann accesses Construction Superintendent iPad app reports at his desktop. (Photo courtesy of Brinkmann Constructors)



LED lighting technology used by Skanska. (Photo courtesy of Skanska)